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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 HAVANA 000592

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CCA
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/25/2019
TAGS: PREL, CASC, EAID, ETTC, ODIP, OEXC, OFDP, PHSA, PHUM,
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SUBJECT: GOC SIGNALS "READINESS TO MOVE FORWARD"

REF: A. A) HAVANA 511 ("USINT FOLLOW-UP ON MIGRATION
TALKS")
B. B) HAVANA 512 ("BRITISH EMBASSY SEEKS TO BUILD
CIVIL SOCIETY")
C. C) HAVANA 437 ("GOC RESPONDS TO TIP DESIGNATION")

Classified By: Political Counselor Joaquin Monserrate for Reason 1.4(D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. Avowing a "readiness to move forward in our relationship," the Government of Cuba granted us unprecedented access to its state institutions during the visit of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Bisa Williams from September 16 to 22. To underscore the move, the GOC also offered the Mission quarterly consular access to jailed Cuban-Americans that we identified, and extended full diplomatic protections and multiple-entry visas to USINT's Marine Security Guards and temporary duty personnel. The country's leading opposition figures told DAS Williams that they were heartened by the increased lines of government-to-government communications and encouraged the United States to continue prying open these links. The key to normalizing relations, DAS Williams told the Cubans, was not to be found solely in the degree of bilateral engagement between the United States and Cuba, but in the Cuban Government's efforts to engage its own people and to respond to their wishes. The visit included DAS Williams, participation in the United States - Cuba Direct Mail Talks held in Havana on September 18 (Septel), and took place during the much talked-about "Peace Without Borders" musical concert held on September 20. END SUMMARY.

AN UNPRECEDENTED WEEK

2. (C) WHA Deputy Assistant Secretary Bisa Williams led the U.S. delegation to the Direct Mail Talks with Cuba on September 18. In the following four days, DAS Williams met with officials from the Foreign Relations, Justice, Agriculture, Health and Interior ministries, the Prosecutors' Office, the University of Havana, and local officials in the Province of Pinar del Rio. DAS Williams also held roundtables with the leading figures from Cuba's dissident and blogger communities, and with resident EU ambassadors. In addition, she was allowed to travel twice outside the Havana Province perimeter, to visit the Latin American School of Medicine and the areas hardest hit by hurricanes in 2008 in the westernmost province of Pinar del Rio.

"CONFIDENCE BUILDING" KEY TO MOVE FORWARD

3. (C) DAS Williams discussed the purpose and ramifications of her visit and the Mail Talks during an extended meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Dagoberto Rodriguez. They agreed that further "confidence building" was essential, and acknowledged the considerable work that lies ahead. When DAS Williams brought up the treatment of prisoners in Cuban jails, for instance, Rodriguez noted how dialogue on this would be possible but only with countries with which there is "sufficient confidence" and mutual respect. The same, he said, applied to scholarships and lifting reciprocal travel restrictions on U.S. diplomats in Cuba and Cuban diplomats in

Washington, to name just two areas.

4. (C) VM Rodriguez seemed optimistic that things were moving in a positive direction. "We see a change in the rhetoric," he told Williams. "Even within the existing diplomatic constraints, we see a way forward." In granting

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almost all of DAS Williams' requests for Government of Cuba (GOC) meetings, "we meant to show our readiness to move forward in our relationship," he added.

RELAXING RESTRICTIONS ON USINT

5. (C) At the meeting, VM Rodriguez announced that the GOC would grant the Mission, effective immediately, access to eight Cuban-Americans serving prison terms here (REF A), including those outside the confines of Havana Province, and extend diplomatic protections to our short and long-term temporary duty personnel, including granting them multiple-entry visas (Note: The GOC's abrupt decision in 2007 to stop issuing multiple-entry visas to the U.S. MSG detachment has been a bilateral point of contention as well as a serious morale and operational challenge for post . End Note). That is as far as it goes for now, the VM said. Acknowledging that the USG has already indicated readiness to move from authorized to notified travel for Cuban diplomats in Washington, Rodriguez said that more confidence-building would be required before the GOC would be willing to lift long-standing restrictions on travel by USINT personnel outside Havana.

STILL WARY OF OUR HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

6. (C) Although VM Rodriguez said that the domestic travel restrictions had been placed in response to U.S. limits on Cuban diplomats in Washington, he complained about our emphasis on raising human rights wherever we go. "I would note that when those trips took place, they were only used for just one type of activity," he said, in reference to outreach to the island's political opposition. "Sometimes it seemed that the only purpose of the trip was to pursue that type of meeting." He went on to complain that "your policy until now has been that civil society is only made up of one type of people; Cuban civil society is much broader than these small circles."

7. (C) The Foreign Ministry repeatedly warned DAS Williams about meeting with leading dissident "criminals," and was especially sensitive to the idea that international media might portray such contact in a way that embarrasses the regime. VM Rodriguez showed no flexibility on the two specific human rights cases raised, requests for medical

leave for prisoner of conscience Ariel Sigler Amaya and an exit permit for the wife of prisoner of conscience Oscar Biscet to travel to Spain for medical treatment.

THE EU ON THE GROUND AND THE OPPOSITION

8. (C) The Ambassadors of Sweden, Spain, the United Kingdom, Hungary, France and the EU charge, told DAS Williams at a roundtable meeting that the access of their visitors to the GOC was always conditioned on shunning the opposition. When they learned that Williams would see opposition anyway, they announced that they would protest the "double standard" and would begin to demand similar leeway for their visitors.

9. (C) The meeting with the EU countries exposed the divisions between those that place human rights at the top of their agenda, like Sweden and the UK, and those that do not, like Spain and France. Some in the latter camp, joined by the EU representative at the meeting, dismissed the dissidents in the same terms as the GOC, insisting that "they

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do not represent anyone." The UK Ambassador told us that the EU was so divided that they could not even agree upon a set of specific human rights benchmarks. (REF B) "It's not that we're not doing human rights," the EU rep replied, "but we want to trade and invest." The UK Ambassador told us on the side that potential visitors from countries interested in meeting with civil society (e.g., UK, Hungary) are undercut with the GOC by visits from EU countries who are not interested (e.g., Spain, France). The EU group was uniformly critical of the U.S. embargo on Cuba, yet they volunteered that the embargo gave the USG leverage with the GOC which the EU lacked.

OPTIMISM IN THE CUBAN CIVIL SOCIETY

10. (C) DAS Williams met separately with a broad range of civil society activists, including dissidents, former political prisoners, independent journalists and bloggers. Although scathing in their assessment of the GOC's intentions towards the United States, they all strongly supported continued government-to-government engagement and expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to meet with a visiting high-ranking U.S. official. "For the first time Cuba has an administration in the U.S. which is dealing intelligently and eschewing rhetoric," dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe told us. They also urged patience. "The process of change is afoot, I know it will be slow, but the top is crumbling," Espinosa Chepe's wife and diplomat-turned-dissident Miriam Leyva stated.

11. (C/NF) The bloggers, who partly out of self-preservation

do not want to be lumped in with the dissident community, were equally optimistic about the course of events. "An improvement in relations with the United States is absolutely necessary for democracy to emerge here," blogging pioneer and Time magazine's 100-most influential person Yoani Sanchez told DAS Williams in her modest apartment. "Restrictions only hurt us," she added. "Do you know how much more we could do if we could use Pay Pal or purchase things on-line with a credit card?"

POSSIBLE OPENING FOR ACADEMIC COOPERATION

12. (C) In DAS Williams, meetings with Cuban officials, the GOC criticized the USG's "one-sided" approach to academic cooperation. VM Rodriguez said that, as confidence builds, the GOC would review whether to loosen its strict stance on U.S.-sponsored scholarships. "The key is what kind of relationship we have, it doesn't make sense to do scholarships now when relations are poor." He noted, however, that Cuba would prefer scholarships in the hard sciences, and in the past the USG had offered only social science courses.

13. (C) Despite this, DAS Williams, meeting at the University of Havana was positive, constructive, and frank, with a focus on learning from past failures and exploring avenues for future cooperation. The University was represented by the Vice Rector for International Relations, the Director of the Center for U.S. Studies, and other faculty and staff. The Vice Rector noted approvingly that this was the highest ranking U.S. visit ever to the University, and hoped that this indicated a positive change in posture towards academic cooperation. University officials appeared open to DAS Williams, suggestion that they invite USINT COM or other American speakers to the

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university to discuss topics of interest to students in an academic, symposium-like setting where there could be real give and take.

EXPLAINING THE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

14. (C) DAS Williams told officials that the USG was concerned that Cuban students who had applied for the USG-offered scholarships were now being subjected to reprisals and discriminatory treatment at the university. She noted that although the university may not have sanctioned such treatment, we had credible reports of its occurrence. Responding, University officials denied reports of officially-sanctioned mistreatment of USG scholarship applicants. They said that the reason the students were prevented from accepting the scholarships stemmed from lack

of advanced coordination with the University. Noting that the USG scholarship program was course credit-oriented and was not compatible with the University's course structure which could not accommodate any lengthy absence during the academic year, the Vice Rector suggested that in the future we propose graduate-level research courses. University of Havana officials were surprised when DAS Williams noted that we had shared information with the Foreign Ministry regarding the proposed educational exchanges well in advance, forcing the a Foreign Ministry representative at the meeting to explain that the GOC had decided unilaterally as a matter of foreign policy that Cuban students would not be allowed to participate in the program.

LAW ENFORCEMENT COOPERATION

15. (C) The GOC pushed hard for increased law enforcement cooperation, especially in counternarcotics. The top drug fighter at the Interior Ministry, Colonel Jorge Samper, commented that bilateral cooperation was often one-sided, and that the GOC would like to be able to work more closely with the United States in sharing information about trafficking patterns in the region. Foreign Ministry officials told us that they would be submitting "next month at the latest" a proposal to increase cooperation in counter-narcotics trafficking, including money laundering. (Note: this is the same proposal that the Foreign Ministry promised to deliver the week after the Migration Talks in New York in July).

16. (C) The GOC also informed us that they had no objections to the voluntary repatriation of Amcitt fugitive Luis Armando Pena Soltren who is wanted in the United States for hijacking an aircraft from the United States to Cuba in 1968. The GOC also received with obvious interest a request from the U.S. Department of Justice that Cuba provide evidence and witnesses in the case against Luis Posada Carriles, a request we made to the Foreign Ministry by diplomatic note during the visit.

CHALLENGING OUR TIPS, TERRORISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS LISTS

17. (C) DAS Williams told Justice and Foreign ministry officials that we were aware of the Cuban government's dissatisfaction with their ranking in the U.S. reports on trafficking in persons and human rights. (REF C) She encouraged the GOC to meet with USINT officials to provide data relevant to both reports, stressing in particular that the trafficking report required information on prosecutions that we had been unable to verify. They bristled at the mere

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suggestion. "Nowhere in international law does it say that the U.S. should or can prepare a report on Cuba," the

Director of the International Cooperation Division of the Justice Ministry stated. "With all due respect, we have no obligation to report anywhere except to the international bodies. When we get to the day of normalization, we could perhaps get to a point where we can discuss these things."

18. (C) On terrorism, the Cubans took a similar line. "What right do you have to judge other countries?" VM Rodriguez asked. "If we were to do our own list the U.S. would be there because in the United States there are thousands of Cubans who are truly terrorists." However, on terrorism the Cubans seemed slightly less reluctant to engage. DAS Williams stressed that removal from the sponsors of terrorism list would be possible if specific procedures were followed and she encouraged VFM Rodriguez to meet with COM Farrar to review the process. "You just told us to study how to get off the list without telling us how," Foreign Ministry's Director of the International Cooperation Josefina Vidal pleaded, leaving the door open to further discussions on this.

U.S. FUGITIVES

19. (C) DAS Williams took the opportunity to press the Cubans on the over 100 fugitives believed to be resident in Cuba. She told Interior and Foreign Ministry officials that the issue would not go away and that we would continue to seek their return. Noting that similar Cuban requests were ignored in the early 1960s, Vidal quipped: "We have a long list ourselves."

MAKING AN IMPACT IN THE HURRICANE IMPACT ZONE

20. (C) DAS Williams got a chance to visit the worst-hit areas by hurricanes Ike and Gustav in 2008, in Cuba's westernmost province of Pinar del Rio. Unlike in 2008, when we were kept at arm's length by the GOC, the regional authorities received us warmly, giving us a detailed presentation of the damage and rebuilding work. The Venezuelans supplied roofing material -- "they send us one container after another, week after week," Provincial Assembly Chairman Ernesto Barreto told us -- and even building a model 38-home neighborhood of aluminum-walled, steamy homes. Stiff and unsure of our intentions at first, the Chairman and his entourage became progressively affable as the visit went on, even riding in the USINT van with our delegation to encourage us to visit more often.

THE MEDICAL SCHOOL

21. (C) Despite having repeatedly denied USINT permission to visit the Latin American Medical School (ELAM) just outside the limits of Havana Province, the GOC consented to DAS Williams' request. At ELAM, we met a half-dozen American

students who enrolled in the six-year program through the U.S.-based Pastors for Peace program. They were enthusiastic with ELAM's focus on social work, and happy to see their country's representatives. They told us that they were unaware that USINT had been kept from visiting them at ELAM. The students had few complaints about the school, but at least one urged for assistance in easing the process of receiving funds from home. All of the students lamented that their academic study in Cuba does not qualify them to defer

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payment of their undergraduate student loans as they would have been able to if they had pursued medical training in the U.S. (Note: USINT Consular section will follow-up with CA on how to facilitate their ability to receive financial support from their parents in the U.S. End Note.)

THE CONCERT

22. (C) While the visit was taking place, another event --the "Peace Without Borders" concert organized by Colombian musician Juanes-- dominated the news. Cubans of all stripes read subtle messages everywhere, from the song selections to the statements proffered from the stage. What was unique was how universally praised the concert was here. Vice Foreign Minister Rodriguez and blogger Sanchez both agreed that the concert had turned a page in Cuban history. "The concert is a beginning, it's part of what are doing," Rodriguez said.

COMMENT: TIME TO TAKE STOCK AND FOLLOW UP

23. (C) It is hard to overstate just how markedly improved were our dealings with the Cuban Government and GOC institutions during the Mail Talks and subsequent meetings of DAS Williams' visit. Whether this presages a true operational shift on the part of the GOC remains to be seen. What is clear is that the GOC is willing to fine-tune its adversarial stance if it sees it in its interest to do so. This presents us with enormous opportunities to set and influence the terms of our future exchanges (Septel). As we did during the visit, we will continue to press the point that the GOC engagement with the Cuban people will do more to influence the bilateral relationship than its government-to-government engagement. Nonetheless, there are a number of action items from the various meetings that provide opportunity for us to test the GOC's willingness to continue to make progress on issues of interest.

FARRAR

=====CABLE ENDS=====